

MISSIOLOGY AND ANABAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY: CHALLENGES TO BUILDING PEACE

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Introduction

When we speak of missiology, ecclesiology and theological education from the perspective of our institutions and churches we need to view them as exercises in understanding the mysteries of God. We can only begin to speak of God inasmuch as we are willing to perceive God in the infinite greatness of the Cosmos, in the immensity of God's loving kindness as manifest in the Son, Jesus of Nazareth,² and in the manner by which we express ourselves - in our educational centers, in our churches, in our diverse cultures, in our society - with deeds and words reflecting the love of God that dwells in our hearts.

When we think of missiology we must go all the way back to the creation of all things because the glory of God is manifest there. When we speak of ecclesiology we must immediately fall back on the Holy Scriptures because they witness to God's covenant with humanity. It is a covenant that extends from the formation of a people, Israel, passing through the New Testament, with the coming of Jesus, to the full manifestation of God's Holy Spirit reaching to all nations and cultures.

We are gathered here in a center of theological education and it is possible that we are thinking of the Biblical Sciences, of Hermeneutics, of Systematic Theology, of Anthropology, of the Biblical languages, of the Pastoral Disciplines, of the History of the Church, of Ethics and of other disciplines as the basic avenues through which to reflect on the missiological and ecclesiological issues of our time. Now I grant that there is a degree of truth in this, but on this occasion I would like to begin to think about the missiological and ecclesiological challenges before us by referring to the revelation that the loving God shared with me through our sister Cecilia Espinoza Jiménez, a sister from the indigenous Triqui people I visited in March 2005.

Cecilia Espinoza lives in the town of San Isidro de Morelos, in the District of Tlaxiaco in the State of Oaxaca.³ It is located about 300 miles southeast of Mexico City,

¹ Translated from Spanish by John Driver.

² Robert Haight, *Jesús símbolo de Deus*, Sao Paulo: Editora Paulinas, 2003

³ The Triqui people are found in the western part of the State of Oaxaca, principally in the following localities: a) San Andrés Chicahuaxtla and Santo Domingo del Estado, a district of Putla; b) San Martín Itunyoso and San José Xoxhixtlán, in the district of Tlaxiaco; and c) San Juan and San Miguel Copala in the district of

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D.F. She is descended from a people that during the colonial period had as their authorities persons of considerable note and whose positions were hereditary. During the 19th century, thanks to the confiscation of lands carried out during the agrarian reform, the lands of the Triqui were sold to the García Veyrán Company. However, following the revolution, a part of their territory was restored to the Triqui people. From 1920 onward several groups of the dominant Putla people entered the Triqui territories as coffee buyers and dealers in a traffic of arms and rum. Between 1940 and 1948, San Andrés Chicahuaxtla and San Juan Copala were reduced from their status as municipalities, with only San Martín Itunyoso remaining as a municipality.⁴

Throughout the lowlands the traditional structures of authority among the Triqui disappeared because the cultivation of coffee tended to increase the private ownership of property and violent conflicts over the possession of land increased. In San Isidro de Morelos, as well as in La Laguna de Guadalupe located in the highlands, conflict over the possession of land was much less frequent. But the scarcity of land led to the migration of its inhabitants toward the small cities nearby and even to the larger cities farther away in search of work. For these reasons, Cecilia Espinoza is part of an indigenous people that has struggled for many years to survive in the midst of a society that marginalizes its indigenous cultures.

The women weave their own garments and proudly wear them in La Laguna de Guadalupe and San Isidro de Morelos, as a part of their cultural heritage handed down to them by their grandmothers. Today their textiles are not only an external expression of their indigenous identity, but also by selling them they are able to support their families. Mothers and daughters rise early in the morning to grind corn on their handmade stone mills⁵ and travel to the nearby municipal markets to sell their *tortillas* and *tamales*.⁶ After they lost their land, the men have not always been able to find employment. Mexico City has absorbed many of the Triqui emigrants, by offering them the tasks that no one else will perform. This has led to depression and alcoholism among many.⁷

The day I visited with Cecilia Espinoza she was lying in bed, with her long dark hair, and without her lower limbs. She greeted me with a broad smile. I found her living in a hut with walls of sticks plastered with mud and a dirt floor. Her humble hut stands beside the building where the *Pentecostés Montes de Sion* congregation meets. Her father lives nearby in another simple dwelling. Across the street there is pasture. Here her brother, Fernando, lives with his wife, Alejandra, and their daughters in a little house surrounded by

Juxtlahuaca. For more details see: "Triquis/Tinujei", <http://www.aquioxaca.com/indigenas/ini.htm>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A stone for grinding corn widely used among indigenous peoples in Central America.

⁶ An interview recorded by the author with Alejandra Bautista Sánchez, San Isidro de Morelos, Oaxaca, México.

⁷ An interview recorded by the author with Fernando Espinoza Jiménez, San Isidro de Morelos, Oaxaca, México, Thursday, March 3, 2005.

dogs, chickens, turkeys and a goat. While we were talking his elderly father approached us, dressed in simple clothing, barefoot, and carrying a walking cane in his hand. He greeted me in Triqui and I soon realized that he was hard of hearing.

When his sister began speaking in her native Triqui language I, of course, could not understand her, but her brother Fernando translated her words into Spanish. Cecilia's words sounded to me like the soft murmur of fresh water that flows in their highland streams. As Cecilia was recounting her story she described a dream, a vision that she had received that made my hair stand on end and my heart beat faster. As she was speaking I remembered the words of the prophet Joel (2:28): "Then afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

Cecilia Espinoza's Vision

"I dreamed that I was being lifted into the heavens and that my feet were dangling freely. In my hands I had the Holy Scriptures that shone like the sun. I dreamt that I was reading from the Holy Scriptures. There was the story of that star filled night when the Lord Jesus of Nazareth said to Nicodemus: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, in order that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Another of the favorite texts that she read was the confession of long-suffering Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job. 1:21).

In my vision it sometimes seemed that the earth was opening with terrifying rumbling and quakes. People ran from one place to another, crying out in great fear. But I stood there calmly with the Word in my hand, lifted up toward heaven with my feet dangling freely below me. I shared with them the Word and told them not to fear, because God was with them.

These words reached my people, and the enormous multitude formed itself into a circle. They came carrying their children in their scarves. The women came dressed in their red *guipiles* (garments) with their multi-colored needle work. I kept reading the Word and it became alive among the vast crowd of people who kept looking up and listening to the stories of *Yan'anjan*⁸ the Creator God and the gentle work of Jesus through his parables and miracles.

The people were harvesting their corn and the *nopal*⁹ that serves them as food and medicine. The flocks of donkeys, goats and sheep covered the hills around La Laguna and the water in the rivers flowed with great turbulence around the enormous circle of people that joyfully listened to the words of wisdom coming from the Word of Life, as I read. We

⁸ This word refers to God the Creator among the Trique. It is the same word that it used in the Triqui translation of the Bible.

⁹ A type of cactus that grows in the vicinity of San Isidro de Morelos.

were all filled with overflowing happiness. And many other peoples, anxious to hear these life-giving words gathered around the circle.”¹⁰

Pastoral Care

Cecilia’s vision leads us to consider the challenge, not only of preaching the Gospel, but also the importance of pastoral care with a view to making people whole in our communities, in our congregations, and in the vicinities in which we share our faith. We often need mirrors in order to discern and evaluate the ways in which we carry out our mission and shape our ecclesiologies. The theological vision of Cecilia Espinoza enables us, not only to catch a glimpse of the relationship between heaven and earth, but also see the spirituality that flows from the Word, and the struggle of our indigenous peoples of mixed African and indigenous descent for survival. Cecilia’s vision alerts us to the necessity of caring for our planet, buffeted by warfare, by the destruction of the environment, and by the unbridled human consumption of its resources. Cecilia’s testimony and vision allows us to perceive not only the utopian dimension of heaven within our limited earthly context in which the struggle for personal and collective existence takes place, but also as the context for pastoral care by which we can touch the woes of our world with truly pastoral healing.

The pastoral care¹¹ of our co-workers, our communities of faith, our peoples, the marginalized in our city slums, emigrants and victims of violence, our own bodies, our families, nature and our ecosystems, must be included before we undertake the task of reflecting intellectually on our themes. When we speak of pastoral care we must recall other terms in our language like: care of souls, ministry of accompaniment, group ministries, pastoral care within a culture, pastoral care in time of grief, of sickness and of death. The theological task,¹² seen as reflection on, and as a systematization of, our understanding of God must be undertaken with tenderness, affection, concern for, and knowing how to care for others.

Cecilia’s theological vision was preceded by an expression of pastoral care characterized by tenderness and concern. Coming, as she did, from a very humble background in a poor indigenous Triqui family, Cecilia began to experience medical problems with her legs. At eight years of age, she suffered from a disease that left her legs paralysed and finally it was necessary to amputate them. Years later, in 1977, Claude Good, a Mennonite Voluntary Service worker, visited her. In addition to visiting her, he provided

¹⁰ This is a free version of the author’s interview with Cecilia Espinoza, with a Spanish translation from the Trique language by Fernando Espinoza, San Isidro de Morelos, Oaxaca, México, Friday, March 4, 2005.

¹¹ For recent materials on “pastoral care” see the following: Julio de Santa Ana, *Por las sendas del mundo caminando hacia el reino*, San José: DEI-UBL, 1984. Howard Clinebell, *Asesoramiento y cuidado pastoral*, Michigan: Libros Desafío, 1999. Leonardo Boff, *Saber cuidar: ético do humano – compaixao pela terra*, Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, Tenth Edition, 2004.

¹² On the theological task see: Sidney Rooy (Comp.), CLADE IV, *Presencia cristiana en el mundo académico*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, 2001.

her with medicines and vaccinations.¹³ Claude and his wife Alice Good and their daughters had arrived in Mexico early in 1960 to live in La Laguna de Guadalupe,¹⁴ a small town near San Isidro de Morelos. They also worked at translating the Bible into the Triqui language. Claude kept on visiting Cecilia, in her illness, for a considerable period of time without talking to her about God. But after some time, Cecilia, intrigued by the gentleness and compassion of Claude, wanted to know about his understanding of God. In that way, with the help of the New Testament that had been recently (1966) translated into Triqui,¹⁵ Cecilia began to learn the message of Jesus Christ.

By using the Triqui translation of the New Testament Cecilia Espinoza learned to write and to read the Bible in her own language. In San Isidro de Morelos Cecilia became key to the spread of the Bible's message among her own people and in their own language. The way in which she went about sharing the Biblical message was this: her family gathered around her, and seated in her wheel chair, she would tell the stories of the Old and New Testaments in Triqui. Then the leader, or pastor, of the Triquis would teach from the texts that she had read, adding further comments on the reading. This went on for many years since, even though Triqui was the native tongue spoken by all, they were unable to write or read in their own language.

One of the texts that had embedded itself deeply in Cecilia's heart was Mark 16:15:¹⁶

The Gospel of Mark 16:15

Trique

English

Hue dan ni gataja so'

And he said to them,

Guni'. Nej si, Guij y re'

Go into all the world

Gacha' xumigui ga' ui' nuguna' an

and proclaim the good news

Re'nuguan sa' a rian daran' gui.

to the whole creation.

This beautiful text reminds us of our Anabaptist tradition expressed in the preaching of the Austrian evangelist, Hans Hut, in the 16th century of the Gospel to every creature.¹⁷ In the first place, this was Jesus' charge to preach the good news in all of the world and in every language to the creatures who inhabit every geographic region of the earth. In the second place, we must recognize God's manifestation in all of nature, since its

¹³ On the origins of Mennonite Mission work in Mexico see: Kenneth Seitz and Guillermo Zuñiga, "History of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of the Central Plateau of Mexico," Unpublished manuscript, 1976. (Shared with the author by Guillermo Zuñiga.)

¹⁴ On the beginnings of the Mennonite work among the Triqui in La Laguna see: Interview with Pascual Salazar García, recorded by the author, La Laguna, Oaxaca, Mexico, Saturday, March 5, 2005.

¹⁵ See: "Nuguan' naca nagui' yaj yya Yan'anj and an nga" in *El Nuevo Testamento de nuestro Señor Jesucristo*. México D. F.: Sociedad Bíblica de México, Texto en Castellano 1966. Sociedades Bíblicas en América Latina. Trique de Chicahuaxtla y Español, 1963.

¹⁶ See: Nuguan' naca nagui' yaj yya Yan'anj anj an nga in: *Op. cit.*, p. 341.

¹⁷ Hans Hut was one of the most effective of the Anabaptist evangelists in Moravia in his response to this text. Hans Hut, together with other martyrs, was burned to death in his cell in 1527, following the Augsburg Anabaptist Synod. See: Herbert Klassen, "The Life and Teaching of Hans Hut", (Part I), in: *MQR*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, July, 1959, p. 171-205.

central message is God's revelation to every creature and in every creature. That is, to every creature in whom God has breathed the breath of life. In the third place, the text contains the notion that creation not only reveals the Creator, but also the divine desire that God's will be revealed to all creation.

The Great Commission in Mark's Gospel (16:15) takes on a special dimension when we remember that the text has an imperative, "Go", and the one who recites it and accepts its authority for her life, has no feet for going. In spite of her physical limitations, due to the loss of her limbs and her poverty, Cecilia is an example of how God can use any of us in service. With her hands she not only has woven beautiful multicolored garments in the tradition of her ancestors, but they have handled over and over the Biblical texts. This is what her brother Fernando pointed out when he said: "My sister Cecilia has read and shared the gospel so continuously with so many people that she has in recent years worn out three New Testaments. She is actually using her fourth New Testament."¹⁸

Today we marvel at Cecilia's theological vision, but we need to reiterate that it is only with pastoral gentleness that we can grow in our deep desire to share God's great good news with students, professors, lay people, pastors and members of our churches. By this we do not intend to accentuate the role of academia in our understanding of reality through the social sciences, economics, hermeneutics or the study of the Biblical languages or medicine, but that these must all be subordinated to our capacity for compassionate caring. Without this, without that pastoral gentleness, we pastors as God's creatures, will not be able to fully proclaim the will of God to our fellow humans.

The Vision from Heaven: God's Caring and Human Pain

Cecilia's life is so surprising because, without any formal education, and in spite of the poverty in which she has lived right up to the present, she was the key person, together with her brother Cornelio Espinoza, Pascual Salazar García, Isidro Salazar García and Claude Good, that made it possible to translate and publish, in 1984, a version of the Old Testament,¹⁹ called *Si-Nuguan' Yan'anj Xangá*.

Returning to her vision, we note two dimensions: that of heaven and that of the earth. In her vision she found herself in the heavenly plane where she had recovered the limbs that she lost in childhood. She was the one who had the Word of God in her hands to proclaim its message to surrounding peoples. What I find astonishing in her vision is its heavenly dimension, that when she opened the Word for the first time it was to remind all of God's unlimited kindness and great love, loving us to the point of being willing to send his only Son in order that we might have fullness of life, eternal life. The first textbook with

¹⁸ From an interview with Fernando Espinoza, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Si-Nuguan' Yan'anj Xangá, Resumen del Antiguo Testamento en Triqui de Chicahuaxtla y en español*. Published for the American Bible Society by: W.H.B.L. Liga del Sembrador A.C. Illustrations used with permission of the United Bible Societies and David C. Cook Foundation. First edition, 1984.

which Cecilia learned to read in her own Triqui language was the New Testament.

Beginning in 1977, when Cecilia Espinoza first began to read and to understand the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in Triqui, until 1984 when she collaborated on the first abbreviated edition of the Old Testament in Triqui, the stories that her people heard from Cecilia's lips were of, and about, Jesus. We can say that Cecilia, moved by the mercy of God and by her reading of the New Testament, came to understand, just as the Apostol Paul and Menno Simons²⁰ had, that Jesus Christ is the foundation of incarnation and the dazzling grace of God toward all humanity and creation. The stories of Jesus found their way deep into her heart, above all because the Gospel shows us the great love of the Son of God. Jesus of Nazareth, who walked along the paths of Galilee teaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, healing all manner of diseases among the people. Cecilia Espinoza came to know Jesus of Nazareth, and she identified with the one whose fame spread throughout all Syria. And the Holy Scriptures tell us that they brought to him all who were afflicted with disease and all sorts of sickness, the demon possessed, lunatics, epileptics and paralytics (Mat. 4:23-25).

Her second reading of the Word is no less impressive. Cecilia identified with Job, the patient sufferer of the Old Testament. The text of Job 1:21, written by her very hands in the Triqui language takes on deep significance. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In the first part of the text we find hidden the existential agony that Cecilia Espinoza suffered for many years: her childhood, her birth into a large poverty-stricken family. We note that Cecilia, just as Job had done, recognized that life proceeds from God. Life's greatest miracle is life itself. But Cecilia experienced physical pain in her body, and just as Job had, she remembers the fragility of life. "A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last." (Job 14:1-2)

In her memory there were the difficult years of childhood, brought on by the extreme pain in her limbs. She recalls sleepless nights, the throbbing pain in her legs that racked her little body. She remembers the blankets on her bed, damp with perspiration from her fevers and hot tears. She recalls peeking through the cracks in the walls of the hut as she watched the neighbor children feeding grains of corn to the chickens. Why must I suffer so, while my brothers and sisters run after the butterflies among the wild flowers? How much, oh God, would I like to play without pain! How much, oh God, would I like to run with the

²⁰ The foundational writing of Menno Simons bears the title, "*Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers*" and was first published in 1539-40. It should be pointed out that for both, Jesus Christ is the foundation for faith, Menno Simons in the context of a medieval hermeneutic that emphasized following Jesus in the light of God's wrath, and Cecilia in her vision that emphasizes the kindness and gentleness of God. On the concept of discipleship in Menno, see: Marjan Blok, "Discipleship in Menno Simons' *Dat Fundament*: An Exercise in Anabaptist Theology", in: Gerald R. Brunk, ed. *Menno Simons: A Reappraisal: Essays in honor of Irvin B. Horst on the 450th Anniversary of the Fundamentboek*, Virginia: Eastern Mennonite College, 1992, p. 103-129.

other little girls in the neighborhood! These were the questions and the exclamations, ever present in Cecilia's life that led her to identify with the suffering of Job.

Cecilia's years of physical prostration bring to mind, just like Job, our pain and our diseases and the fragility of our own lives. Storms and hurricanes tear off the roofs, destroy our crops, blow down the trees, ruin the levees, and take their toll of victims. There are times in our lives when disease comes and pain lays our loved ones low, when they, and sometimes we, lose a member of our body. There are special moments in our lives when disease attacks, leaving us wounded and hurting. Death also comes unexpectedly and sometimes snatches away those with whom we have shared our lives and love for so many years. Right now we can remember our pain and suffering at the loss of loved ones. We remember family members and friends, sick and wasted by the human fragility we all share. In our seminaries and theological institutions, in our communities and in our churches we need to remember to care for one another. I speak of an attitude that must arise out of the depths of our hearts causing us to show kindness in response to the loving gentleness God.

Our institutions of learning may be able to help us better interpret Job's text with the help of the Hebrew. Good Biblical and theological commentaries may help us to understand better the debates over the themes of retribution and the meaning of evil, or to better analyse the figure of the Leviathan. Sciences such as psychology may help us develop techniques for counseling and caring for the sick and grieving. But first we must allow the Holy Spirit to put on us the seal of gentleness, moving us to compassion and solidarity with the suffering.

In Latin America we carry out our theological reflection and pastoral care in a context characterized by the discouragement of our youth, violence toward our children,²¹ women, and the elderly, social and economic injustices, premature deaths, and the spread of AIDS, natural catastrophes, the destruction of the natural environment, the increase of disease in epidemic proportions and accidents of all kinds. For this reason I have emphasized the heavenly dimension of Cecilia's vision and the challenge to be kind and gentle toward others, just as God is with us.

The Vision from the Earth: Earthquakes and Tempests

The second dimension of Cecilia's vision revealed what was happening to those who are below. The first thing that catches our attention is the terror and fear that takes hold of people because of the earthquakes, opening up wide cracks in the earth. I think that Cecilia's vision has lots to tell us about the realities of our time as we experience natural

²¹ In Brazil every four minutes a person is wounded by firearms, every 15 minutes a person dies as the result of firearms. In the State of Rio de Janeiro alone in the year 2004, a total of 6,438 persons died the victims of firearms. Many of the dead are young persons and children. This has led the Brazilian government to call for a popular referendum on October 23, 2005 in order for the people themselves to decide if arms and munitions sales should be prohibited in Brazil. See: Chico Octavio e Elenilce Bottari, "Uma morte a cada 15 minutos" in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, No. 26,347, Sunday, September 25, 2005, p. 18-20.

disasters happening one after another. Hurricane Mitch went through Central America in the decade of the 90s leaving the area completely destroyed with the resulting economic setback still being felt in a region, which was already poverty stricken. Later, El Salvador was impacted by an earthquake that displaced many poor families in 2001. In recent years Jamaica, Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean have been devastated by hurricanes, torrential rains and tidal waves. The images of devastation caused by the Tsunami tidal wave in December, 2004, are still fresh in our minds. Whole towns were destroyed in Asia, and we still don't know just how many perished from this catastrophe.

The hurricanes, Katrina and Rita, are the most recent of these catastrophic events to affect North Americans. Without pity they wiped out large areas in New Orleans and left cities along the Mississippi coastal area²² devastated. Areas in Texas and Louisiana²³ were also seriously affected. While U. S troops were occupying the city of Baghdad, people of African and Hispanic descent waited in desperation, in the midst of their ruined houses and businesses, hoping that helicopters and medical personnel might come to their rescue. People ran about filled with fear and terror in the devastated city of New Orleans, just as Cecilia had seen in her vision. All nature is reacting to the great climate changes brought on by humanity's warfare, destruction of forests, contamination of the environment and the break-up of the protective layer of ozone. Just like the text in Romans says, it seems that the whole creation is groaning with labor pains, awaiting our liberation (8:22-23).

Earthquakes and hurricanes destroy everything in their paths, but they also reveal the injustices of those governments that have never been interested in conserving the ecological equilibrium, nor for the welfare of the impoverished people of their nations. Interested more in keeping its troops in the occupied cities of Iraq, Bush's government was indifferent in the face of Katrina, even knowing ahead of time what would happen. And not only that: the suspicions of the parents of black soldiers who fight the wars dictated by Washington soon surfaced. When they were most in need of understanding and help, they were being left behind by a nation preoccupied with its wild dash to prosperity. It is like the *New York Times* reporter recalled, just as it was with the sinking of the Titanic, the richest and the most powerful were the ones who were the first to be saved.²⁴ In her first vision, Cecilia saw terrified people crying out and running from one place to another. Widespread terror and outcries were also a part of the tragic scenes emanating from the city devastated by Katrina. The hurricane force winds destroyed everything in their path. Shopkeepers with guns in their hands kept potential thieves from ransacking their stores.

²² José Meirelles Passos, "A devastacao de Katrina. Cidades fantasmas no Mississippi," in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Second Edition, Sunday, September 4, 2005, p. 36.

²³ Lake Charles, "A devastacao de Rita. A Ameaca das aguas. Furacao atinge fronteira de Texas e Louisiana com ventos de 200 km/h, chuvas e mare alta," in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Sunday, September 25, 2005, p. 41.

²⁴ Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Licoes de Tsunami negra," in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, No., 26,347, Sunday, September 25, 2005, p. 7.

Children were pictured wading among scattered objects in their homes. Streets, filled with up to six feet of water, were turned into lagoons. Youths roamed the streets carrying with them merchandize taken from the flooded stores. Thousands of homeless persons crowded into the Superdome and the Convention Center. The refugees reported that soldiers were shooting at innocent youths. The call-up of 50,000 reservists to protect private property from pillaging and restore a semblance of order in the midst of the chaos came late.²⁵ As Thomas Hobbes had written in 1651, in his book, *Leviathan*, the absence of the authority of the state leads to the breakup of society, leaving survivors at the mercy of their fellow humans. The scenes of vandalism and violence which the people of New Orleans lived through also remind one of the *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (Essay on Blindness) by the Portuguese author, José Saramago, in which an epidemic of blindness thrust a city into chaos, due to the lack of order and official direction. This in turn led to vandalism and unchecked acts of violence which finally ended up in a state of open warfare. In a city with a history of slavery and racial discrimination the hurricane unmasked these social inequalities and the blindness of the Bush administration.²⁶

When we are overwhelmed by natural catastrophes we tend to think of God. Is God present with us, or absent from us, in these disasters? In times of great natural disasters many lose what they have, and sometimes even their lives. It is especially the poor who are the most affected. Be it in the Caribbean, in Central America or in the United States, the poorest and the least protected are the ones who suffer most from earthquakes and hurricanes. People of African descent in the southern states, whose story has been told in American films like *Mississippi in Flames*, by Alan Parker, or *The Color Purple*, a reference to the “exotic” and to the “other”²⁷, are the victims of Hurricane Katrina; and their culture, found in their music, literature, films and culinary arts, is threatened.²⁸

Earthquakes and hurricanes are ways in which nature expressed itself. Katrina has revealed the insensitivity of the Bush administration. Two hundred seventy-one schools have been closed or damaged and more than 135,000 students in Louisiana, 40,000 students in Mississippi, and 35,000 students in Alabama are without classrooms. The dramatic scenes on the streets and the surrounding area in New Orleans exposed the lack of preparation, the inefficiency and the slow response of the Federal Emergency Management Administration, the National Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers in the United States. The National Guard should have been ready to come to the aid of the people of New

²⁵ “Depois da tragedia, a barbarie,” in: *Jornal Extra*, Rio da Janeiro, Friday, September 2, 2005, p. 11.

²⁶ Renato Galeano, “Depois da tragedia, a degradacao da alma humana,” in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Second Edition, Sunday, September 4, 2005, p. 39.

²⁷ See: Jaime Biaggio, “Um lugar mais mítico do que real,” in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Sunday, September 18, 2005, p. 39.

²⁸ See: Jamari Franca, “Um fusao única de culturas no berco do jazz,” in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Second Edition, Sunday, September 4, 2005, p. 38. Antonio Carlos Miguel, “Cultura, a vítima silenciosa do furacao,” in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Sunday, September 18, 2005, p. 39.

Orleans, rather than occupying Iraq. At least a considerable part of the people of the United States would see it this way, knowing that the reconstruction of New Orleans will cost at least one hundred billion dollars, about the same as the United States spends on the Iraq war in six months.²⁹

In the context of his protest to the princes who were persecuting the Anabaptists in the 16th century, Menno Simons said: “Stand in awe of Him who encloses the heavens and the earth in the palm of His hand, who sends forth the fiery shafts of His lightning, the blasts of the tempests, and makes the mountains to shake, who rules all things with the Word of His power, before whom every knee shall bow of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth, and to whom every tongue shall confess that He is the Lord.”³⁰

When we compare Cecilia Espinoza’s vision concerning earthquakes and natural disasters with that of Menno Simons we find notable similarities. Both refer to the lordship of God over all creation, even when the lightening flashes and tempests roar, causing the mountains to quake. In the second place, both see catastrophes and quakes as a way of relativizing all human claims to power and glory. Third, natural disasters reveal our human fragility in the face of the forces of nature. And finally, in the fourth place, in Cecilia’s vision, as well as in Menno’s, there is a dynamic relationship between heaven and earth: the Creator’s will, in the midst of quakes and hurricanes, is present in the Word.

In the earthly dimension of the vision we note again an emphasis on gentleness and tenderness in caring for one another as the fundamental element that joins it to the heavenly dimension of the vision. While she is above, Cecilia’s limbs are restored, and with the Word in her hand she comforts her people, speaking to them words of assurance in times of anxiety and fear. When the love of God is poured out like the sun from the Word they detract Cecilia’s attention away from herself, and she hears the cries of the terrified people on the earth. She stands in heaven with her limbs restored, with the Word of God in her hands, and now her voice, like rays from the sun, reaches the earth to comfort her people. Her voice is heard in that great circle of humanity telling them not to fear because God is with them. The upper and lower dimensions of her vision appear to embrace each other by the power of solidarity and comfort.

Out of her personal experience of physical suffering, out of her identification with suffering Job, out of her encounter with Jesus of Nazareth and the God of life, out of a heart filled with tender kindness, Cecilia’s actions of compassionate solidarity flow out to those filled with terror and fear in a broken world. Cecilia’s vision recalls the prayer which Menno once prayed in solidarity with those who, in his own time, suffered in their broken

²⁹ Helena Celestino, “Bush enfrenta o desafio Katrina,, Recuperaçao de Nova Orleans deve custar o mesmo que seis meses de guerra no Iraque,” in: *O Globo*, Year LXXXI, Second Edition, Sunday, September 4, 2005, p. 37.

³⁰ John C. Wenger, ed. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c.1496 – 1561*, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1974, p. 612-613.

world:

“Do not forsake me gracious Lord, for trees of deepest root are torn up by the roots by the violence of the storm, and lofty, firm mountains are rent asunder by the force of the earthquake. Did not Job and Jeremiah, dear men of Thy love, stumble in temptation, murmur against Thy will? Suffer me not, therefore, gracious Lord, to be tempted above that I am able to bear, for Thou art faithful and good, lest my soul be shamed. I pray not for my flesh, being well aware that it must suffer and die in time, but this alone I ask: Strengthen me in warfare; assist and keep me; make a way for me to escape in temptation; deliver me, and let me not be put to shame, for I put my trust in Thee.”³¹

The Vision from the Earth: The Life-Giving and Comforting Word

What is the mission of the church in the midst of tragedy and human suffering caused by natural disasters? Our word, in the midst of tragedy and suffering caused by earthquakes and hurricanes must be a message of hope, a caring voice of understanding and kindness. In Cecilia’s vision her voice was that of the Word of God. Therefore it was a voice that brought comfort to those suffering from the brokenness of the earth. In the experience of Mennonite communities, our theology and our practice of peace have grown out of the love with which God has taught us to share through compassionate action. In the case of the Caribbean and Central America, the Mennonite Central Committee has served as a living expression of loving kindness that flows out precisely in those times of greatest need among the peoples suffering the effects of natural disasters.

It is important to remember that precisely these disasters has often been the occasions for closely linking North American Mennonites with their sisters and brothers in the Caribbean and in Central America by extending their hands in solidarity and sharing a message of true peace. One of the early expressions of this was the concern of Orie O. Miller, who was then the Executive Secretary of the Mennonite Central Committee, for the welfare of the Haitian people affected by hurricane Hazel in 1954. It was this sense of solidarity, recorded in his diary in January, 1955, that led to the conjoint work of the Mennonite Central Committee and the Missionary Church Association in 1957, and volunteers were sent to Haiti for service in the fields of health and agriculture. Later the Island of Haiti would be devastated by Hurricane Flora in October, 1963, when 1,500 to 4,000 persons died or disappeared. This was followed by Hurricane Inez in September, 1966.³² The Mennonite Central Committee again responded in compassionate solidarity growing out of a practical understanding of the Word that brings spiritual healing to hearts

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³² Following Hurricane Inez, the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worked together in the construction of houses for victims in Cotes de Fer and Marigot. Eldon Stoltzfus, “Haiti”, in: C. J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin (ed.), *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. V, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1990, p. 360-361.

and puts a roof over the heads of families without shelter.³³

In Cecilia's vision we noted the gestures of loving kindness that join heaven to earth when she said: "I read the Word and it took on life among all that great multitude of people who were looking up and listening to the stories of *Yan'anjan*, the Creator God and the gentle acts of Jesus in his parables and miracles." In Central America, in the midst of the terrible earthquakes that filled the city of Managua with terror and death in 1972, Guatemala, in 1976, and El Salvador, in 2001, we can say that we have heard the stories of the Creator God and the gentle acts of loving kindness shown by Mennonite sisters and brothers. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch destroyed Tegucigalpa, in Honduras, and a large part of the city of Managua, in Nicaragua, leaving in its path of destruction, death and impoverishment throughout Central America. With acts of compassion and loving kindness Mennonite sisters and brothers, through their churches and Mennonite Central Committee, came to our aid with food, clothing and shelter for many families who had been left without resources.

This is the true message of a peace that is built, not motivated by self-interests, or by those politically based interests in the restoration of a faded image. Rather, it is the power that flows from the parables and the miracles of love. A true theology of peace is interested in doing acts of loving kindness for the healing of broken bodies, with prayer, with the Word, and in concrete expressions of compassionate solidarity. I am certain that the same acts of tender loving care that Cecilia saw in her vision continue to find expression today in the efforts to aid those victims affected by Katrina and Rita. And here I think of the families of African descent, the Hispanics and the most impoverished families in New Orleans, Louisiana and Texas.

Between Heaven and Earth: The Care of Humanity and the Planet

Is it possible that we have been leaving to one side the practice of love in our outdated missiological and ecclesiological models that don't really work and are largely loveless in their concrete expressions in the life of our peoples? Have we forgotten the loving kindness that really cares about people in need of a spirituality ignited by the fire of the Holy Spirit? In the vision of Cecilia Espinoza, there was on the earthly plane a large circle made up of many peoples involved in the struggles of daily existence. It is not a pyramid. It is a circle and it is an expression of the wholeness of relationships among persons, creatures and the natural universe.

Through their labor, humans interact with natural creation in order to survive. Humanity, using the power of the intellect, seeks to understand the secrets of nature. Thanks to our materialistic understandings of work, we have created the mechanical and electronic machines that support modern society. In this process we humans are losing our admiration,

³³ Elaine Stoltzfus, *Tending the Vision, Planting the Seed. A History of the Mennonite Central Committee in Haiti, 1958-1984*, No date or place of publication., p. 12-14, 104-107.

reverence and affection for nature.

The great challenge that faces us is how to unite our work with our caring, how to bring together our material dimension and our spirituality. We must avoid the danger of enslavement to our work that has been depersonalized, rationalized and subjected to the logic of computation and the machine. We dare not allow our work to take away from us the loving kindness of true solidarity. We are not machines. We think. We show compassion to those who suffer. We are able to unite with one another through acts of kindness toward those who suffer, but we can also rejoice with each other in the enjoyment of God's rich gifts to us in creation.³⁴

To what point are electronic networks the only means that connect us? If they are to have a mobilizing power like that which led to the rise of the Zapatista Movement, it will be because they communicated a message of loving kindness and solidarity toward our sisters and brothers in Chiapas! We tend to lose sight of the fact that we participate in the same universe, the universe of our sister nature, irradiated to us through God's life giving sun. We will often have to push to one side those mountains of paperwork that have piled up on our desks, or that endless collection of books, so that we can join together with our indigenous sisters and brothers and peasants who struggle to conserve their sources of water and their right to live.

If there is something to be found in Cecilia's vision, it is surely her respect for nature. The community's rituals (Nua'nugua'aj) that are celebrated before planting their corn, squash and beans, as well as the ceremonies connected with their harvests, speak to us of a dimension of life of which we still have much to learn. To undertake mission is to be willing to care for all those creatures in which God has instilled the breath of life. When, in these indigenous communities, permission is requested of the earth to plant the grains that will grow, thanks to the rain and sun that a gracious Yan'anjan will send, we note a concern to be caring, a concern to be gentle with nature. In Cecilia's vision we see that we dare not be insensitive toward nature; that we are called to love and to respect her.

We must recognize that every human being is simply a part of that innumerable multitude of living beings, all created by the same God. We are in need of a new way to care for and to organize life on our planet. The natural disasters that are affecting the entire world are indications of the disorder that humankind has brought to the ecosystem. Inspired by our materialistic view of life, we have created machines to monopolize production at the cost of our environment. We ignore the role played by the fields sown with corn and beans and squash, the donkeys in La Laguna de Morelos, the streams and rivers of the Chiapas plateau, the star-studded milky way and human sensitivity and harmony. We must return to the spirituality reflected in Cecilia's vision in order to get in touch with the world we inhabit, so that our world can also come into communion with us.

³⁴ For more on the notion of caring see: Leonardo Boff, *Saber cuidar. Ética do humano – compaixão pela terra*, Petropolis: Editora Vozes, Tenth edition, 2004.